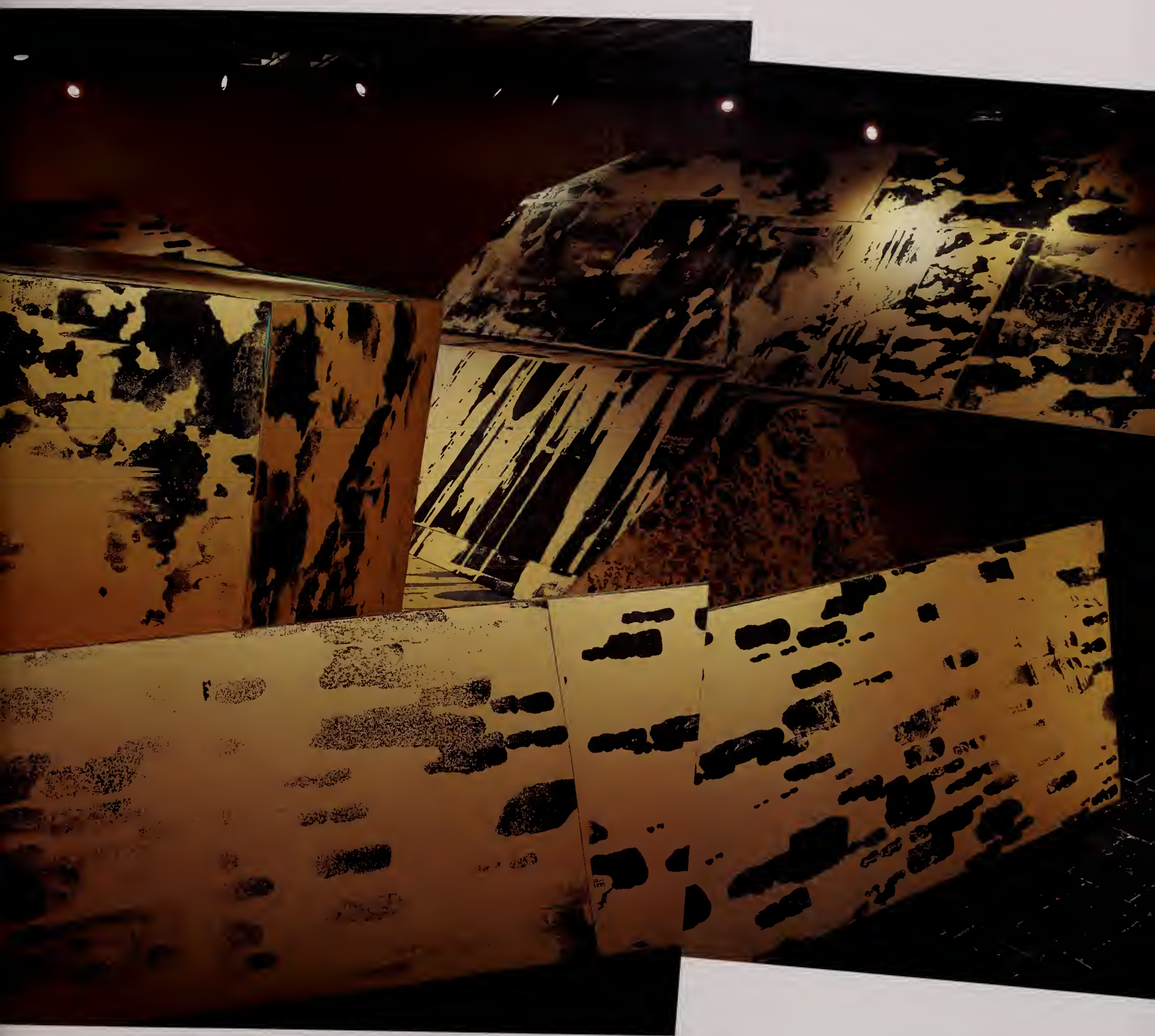


# MICHAEL HEIZER/DRAGGED MASS GEOMETRIC



Whitney Museum of American Art



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Whitney Museum of American Art June 27–September 1, 1985



Photo: Luca Vignelli

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David Whitney  
*Adjunct Curator*

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Photograph by Ivan Dalla Tana.



# Interview

David Whitney and Michael Heizer

*This piece is based on a piece that you made in Detroit in 1971. Would you tell me about that piece.*

The sculpture was a thirty-ton block of granite that was about four by four and one half feet square and thirty feet long, weighing about thirty tons, which would sit on the ground and was wrapped with cables and dragged behind two D-8 Caterpillar tractors back and forth several times in the same path, but cabled differently so that on the forward pull, which was the cutting pull, it was cable-shackled down low where it would pull the edge into the ground and cut like a chisel blade, and then it was pulled back and it was shackled high and dragged so it didn't cut. It would just bounce across the top of the ground.

*But when was it finished? What was the thought behind how much you dragged it?*

Until an impressive pile of dirt was dug up.

*But specifically, a determined amount?*

No, just when it looked good and looked substantial, and it was commensurate with the ambition of the sculpture. The pile was about eight feet high, a big pile. Forty feet long and eight feet high. Probably twenty-five feet thick, you know, wide. It was a big pile of dirt.

*Was it your thought that this piece would remain there?*

No. I was just building it for a show. Obviously you couldn't leave it there forever, because eventually the dirt pile would wear out, you know? Particularly if people would walk on it, and the first thing that happened was that people were climbing all over it. I was naive and I didn't realize they'd do that. I figured people would stay away from the dirt and look at it and just let it go, but the only way you could have had that would have been to put a cyclone fence around it with wire on the top to keep people from getting in. I thought they would actually respect it and look at it and watch the geology of this dirt, the effects of the thaw and the rain.



*Dragged Mass, 1971, under construction, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan*



*Dragged Mass, 1971, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan*

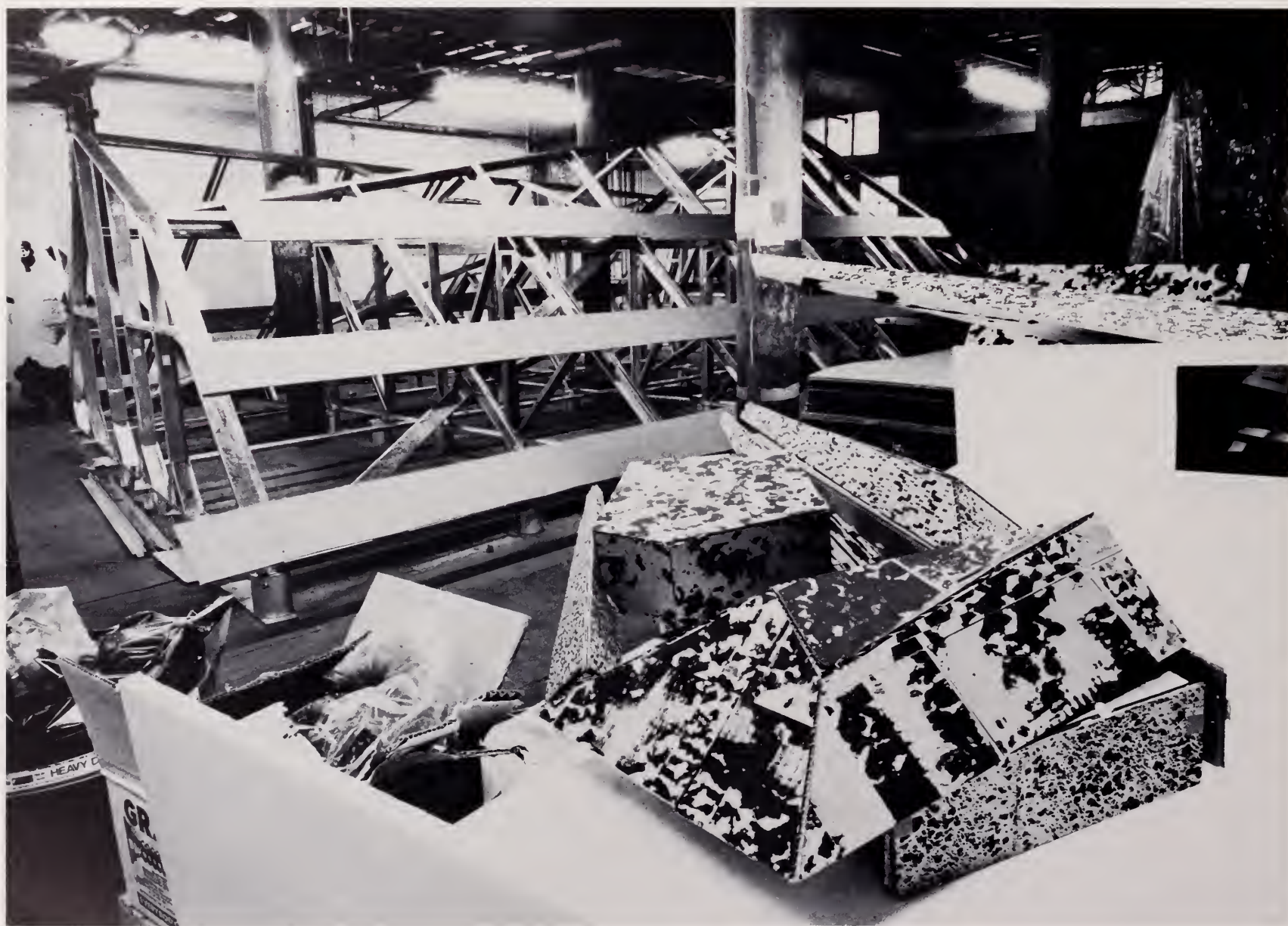


*Do you consider that a process piece? I mean there's a performance aspect there in the nature of how you did it, no?*

No. If you want to build *that* sculpture, that's how you do it. You build it that way; it's not a performance. Sure, everybody gets excited to see all this heavy equipment, cranes and rocks, but that was certainly not the point. The point was that it's for the person who would walk up to it cold and see a thirty-ton block of rock, as big as a bus, and this big pile of dirt and these cables and your mind could put together what had happened and see that it was in front of a museum.

*The piece in Detroit was called Dragged Mass and this one is called Dragged Mass Geometric. Can you tell me how you arrived at the idea of this piece?*

Well, I'd been having the experience of a lot of engineering on a couple of other sculptures. I just became interested in the idea of the dimensionality of engineering drawings; how they work because you can take a form and chop it up and you still have the form, but you actually know more about it because you take a section out of it and remove it so you could see into a volume. So what I thought I would try was to re-dimensionalize a two-dimensional concept of presenting three dimensions.



*Dragged Mass Geometric, under construction, Heizer studio, Greenwich Street, New York, 1985*





*And how is that concept two-dimensional?*

If you take this beer can and you make an engineering drawing of it you might make an isometric drawing, you might make a section drawing, or you might make a plan drawing. If you were to take those three ideas at one time and combine them into one drawing, and then take that drawing and reconstruct it dimensionally, you would have broken the shape up three ways: isometrically, plan, and section.

*What do the actual elements in this piece represent in relation to the Detroit piece?*

You have the rock and the hole that it's dug. You have the dirt that came out of the hole that was made by the rock, and you have . . .

*So those are the furrows on either side?*

Well, it's an accumulated pile on the end, basically. The furrows on the side are windrows which would be tailing and would be left if this rock were moving. The material would be spilling off and as it rolled up in front it would roll and spin off.

*You don't consider the piece as the environment?*

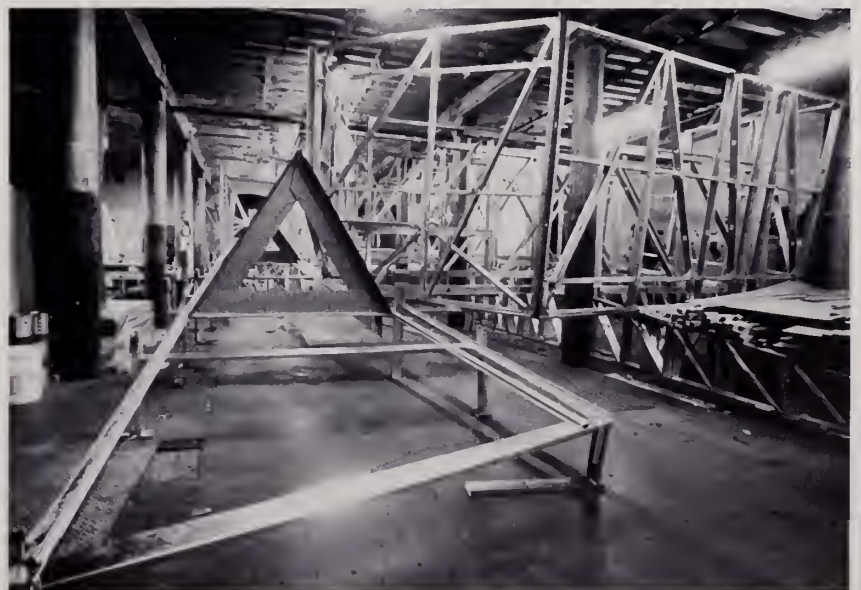
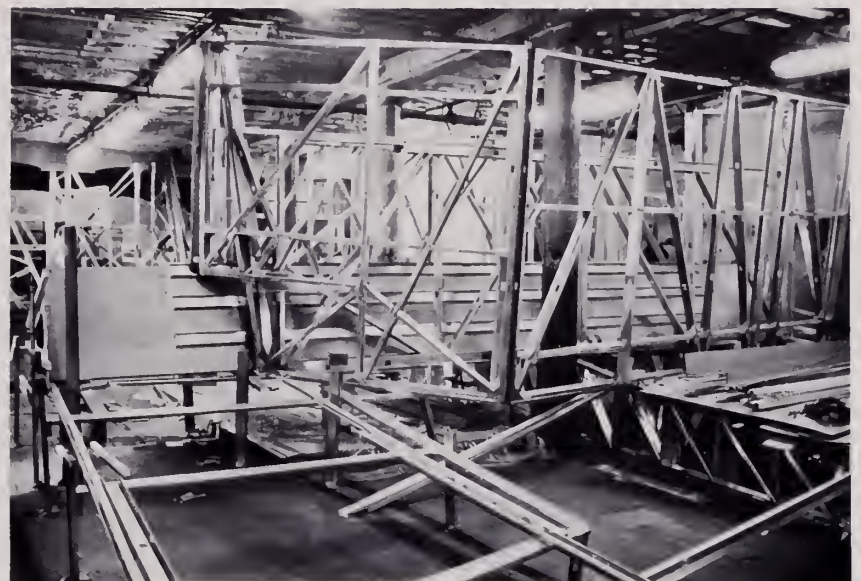
Well it's fifty/fifty with the sculpture.

*How big is the sculpture?*

It's as big as the room. It goes within six inches of the ceiling and within one foot of the walls.

*What are the dimensions?*

Sixteen and a half feet high, one hundred and fifteen feet long, and forty-six feet wide.



*Dragged Mass Geometric, under construction, Heizer studio, Greenwich Street, New York, 1985*



*Is this the first time that you have made an abstract representation of one of your own works? What I'm specifically interested in is whether this is the first time that you have used your own work . . .*

*As source material?*

*As source material.*

In this way, yes. Oh sure, because that's my statement. Everybody's now saying, "Oh I'm influenced by some previous artist" or something like that and I'm saying that I am influenced by myself. So that's my statement. That's the point. Now they are all interested in Indian art or they're interested in Chinese art. It used to be that everyone was interested in each other's work. The Abstract Expressionists were all exchanging ideas and everything and then people became interested in all these other things. But my statement is simply that I don't think there is any reason to go any further because it would take me a long time ever to resolve these ideas sufficiently. A lot of artists can take an idea and keep it going and keep developing it and it gets better.

*How did you come up with the idea of using cardboard?*

I had been using corrugated board for several years to build studies and models. I thought the combined idea of a temporary sculpture that could be quite large and still affordable to be relevant. I also considered the corrugated board to be a humble material similar in value to the dirt, gravel, and rock I have used for years.

*Does it bother you that these are temporary installations?*

Yes. It bothers . . . well, it's not that it bothers me. I'm just watching what happens. If the sculpture were in Asia it would have been protected and cared for and kept. If possible. The Asians have a much broader sense of the value of material. And they cherish works of art on rice paper as much as they would a thing made out of bronze. Besides, I think of this as a sculpture, not as an installation.



Photos: Ivan Dalla Tana



*Dragged Mass Geometric, under construction, Heizer studio, Greenwich Street, New York, 1985*



*How is this piece actually made?*

It's made with metal, lumber, and adhesives and screws and corrugated board. That's it.

*And you silkscreened the corrugated board?*

Right.

*Now, can you tell me about the different patterns of silkscreening?*

That's photography. That's all photography.

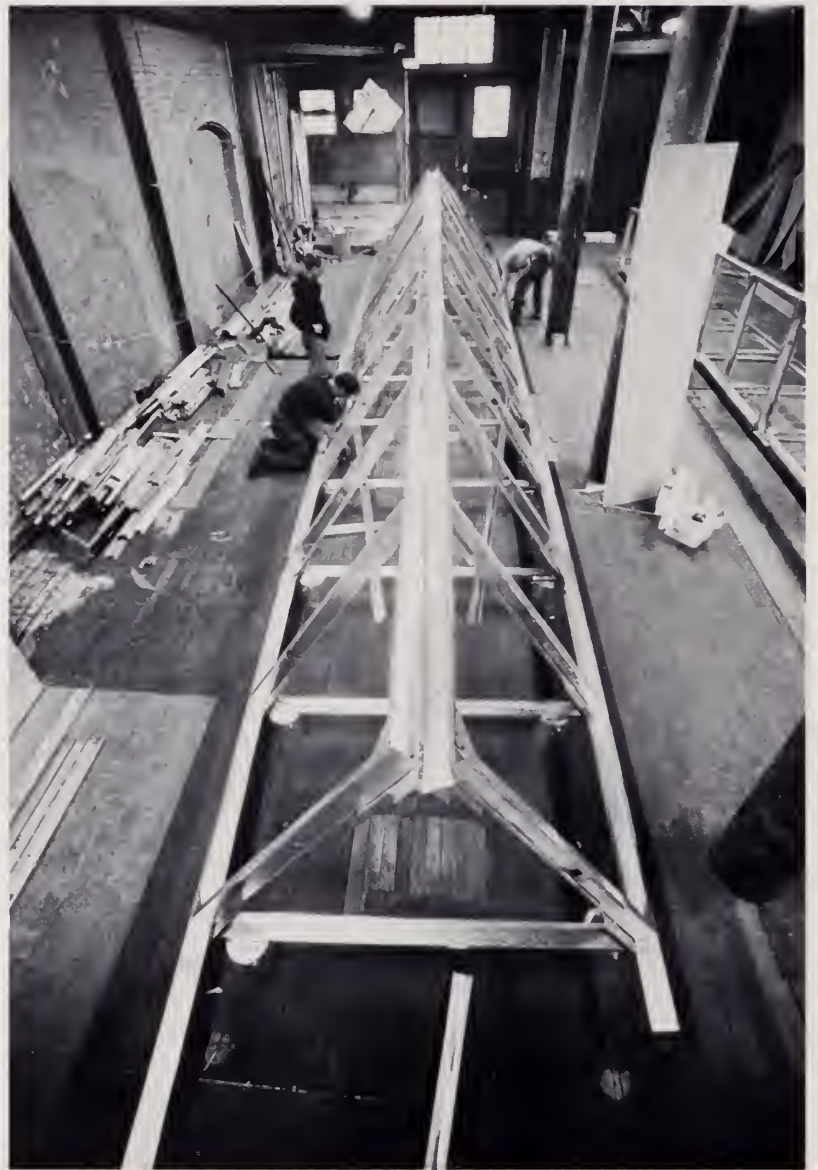
*But how did you arrive at what you wanted to screen on there?*

I never thought about it. It just emerged finally that I had five images of geologic source material that had been magnified greatly. I don't know why. I never really set out to do it on purpose. One photograph is of silver nitrate from photographic paper. It's the grain of the silver in the emulsion on the fiber paper itself magnified—that has been exposed radically in an extensive twelve-minute exposure from twelve feet in the air. The enlarger twelve feet from the paper brings these grains up and then it has been re-photographed and re-enlarged and re-photographed and re-enlarged. Another one is iron under a magnetic influence and a vacuum influence in a vacuum table plus a magnet run over it so it all gets charged up, starts to polarize against itself and all of that. Got the iron all perked up. One is a photograph of dry lake muds. A photograph of the ground just in the middle of the Coyote dry lake in the Mojave; a photograph of inside a hole—a sculpture I made, but the silts are minerals. Mud and minerals.



Silkscreening corrugated board, Heizer studio, Greenwich Street, New York, 1985





Photos: Ivan Dalla Tana

*Dragged Mass Geometric*, under construction, Heizer studio,  
Greenwich Street, New York, 1985



*That's three.*

One I have actually worked with for a long time is Vermont granite which is the biotites and the hornblende [in the inclusions] in the granite, quartzite. It's been high contrasted on film so all the grays have dropped out. It's only the dark stuff, which I believe is hornblende and . . . so that's the dot and it's been blown up and blown up and blown up. Radically blown up. I mean the dots that now would measure maybe a total of 125th of an inch are now blown up to eight feet, or nine feet long so that the magnification is pretty astounding.

*Really, what's the fifth one?*

And the fifth one is India ink.

*Is that the dragged part?*

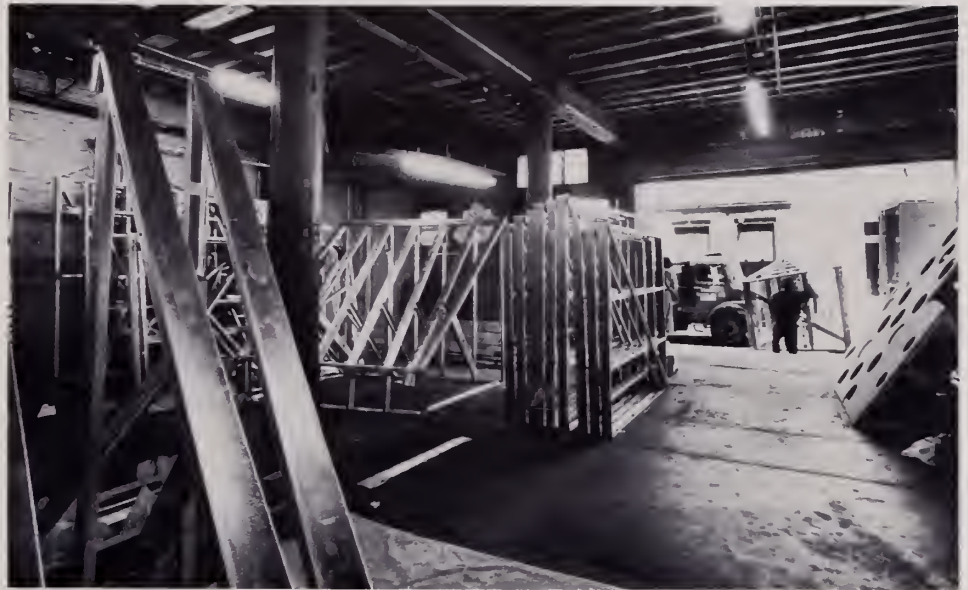
Yes, I want to have a dragged look. I want a dragged friction kind of look. I like the artistic aspect of ink in the studio in New York. Being blown up, too. It's going to be a studio-sourced image, regardless. It will be something that I actually make. It's going to be geologic.

*How did you decide which of these patterns would go on which elements in the sculpture?*

Well the rock grain goes on the rock, the dirt mud goes in the mud pile, the silver nitrate, which is a dot, goes in the windrows, because it looks colloidal, it looks particulate. I wanted to make a distinction between the pile of dirt and the windrows. It's all the same material, but there had to be a photographic distinction as well as a physical one.

*It seems to me like an awfully elaborate way to get some patterns to go on these things.*

It's worth it though, because you don't have to sit around the studio and invent them. Besides, you invent them if you find them.



Moving *Dragged Mass Geometric* to Whitney Museum, 1985



Assembly of *Dragged Mass Geometric* at Whitney Museum, 1985





Photos: Ivan Dalla Tana



Assembly of *Dragged Mass Geometric* at Whitney Museum, 1985

*Didn't you want each piece of cardboard to be screened differently, so when the piece is completed it would not appear to be . . .*

**Boring?**

*Well, but also so that it would not appear to be a repeat pattern?*

**I don't want the thing to look rubber-stamped. I really don't. I want that thing to look like every little part of it is special. And that's what I think we got.**

*Tell me about how you feel about the wall color you selected and why. What is it and why are you using it?*

**The color was chosen because this is an abstraction and the energy that created the original sculpture was the Caterpillar tractor and this is a patented color, I think, or it's a trademark color or copyrighted, whatever they do.**

*Of Caterpillar tractor?*

**Yes. It's a very special color and they're proud of that color and internationally it's a well-known color.**



*Why did you want to use it?*

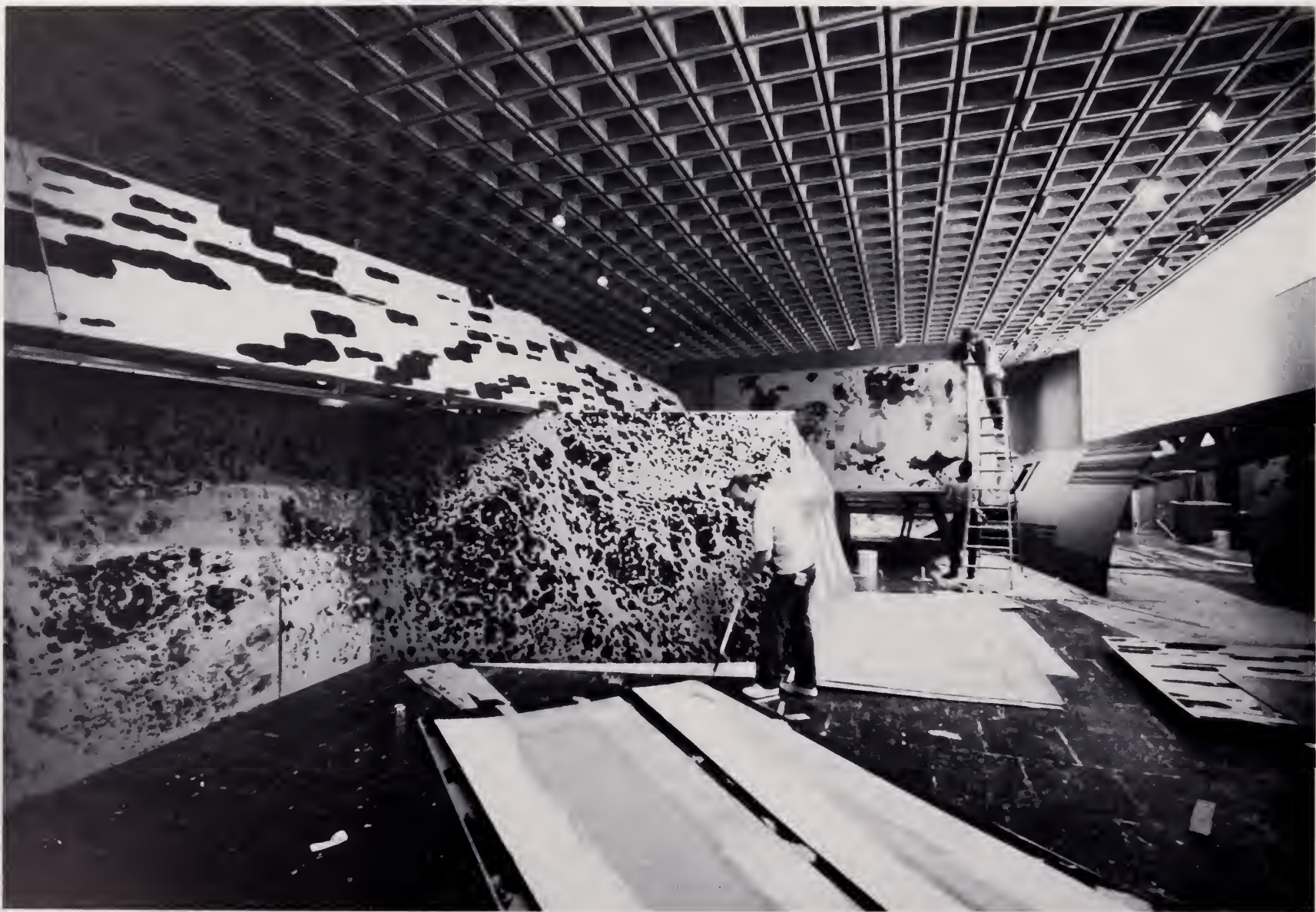
Well, as I say, Caterpillar equipment dragged this rock . . . two, three Cats . . . we had three. We had two big ones and even another one that we brought at one point when things got serious. We had three of the things on this rock. And they were the energy. So the energy is on the walls in the color and the color is an energy color and that's why they paint these energy machines that color. The color itself has that energy. They paint that equipment that way because it's a safe color. It's a color you can see outside where this stuff is used. It has to be to be noticeable. That's why they paint the stuff that way. You paint a piece of equipment fresh yellow and you really see it. When they get dirty, they get dangerous. People slip on them and they misjudge because there are worn spots and the metal gets shiny.



Photo: Ivan Dalla Tana

Assembly of *Dragged Mass Geometric* at Whitney Museum, 1985





Michael Heizer and *Dragged Mass Geometric* at Whitney Museum, 1985



